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FINDINGS FROM “LEARNING AND TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL”, (BUNJO 2012): IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH.

Findings from “Learning and teaching foreign languages in lower secondary school”, (BUNJO 2012): Implications for the education of teachers of English.

This paper takes data from the first part of a longitudinal study, “Learning and Teaching Foreign Languages in lower secondary school”, conducted by the Educational Research Institute in Warsaw. The sample is large scale and representative at the level of school, which allows us to generalise to the general population with some degree of confidence. From the data several areas appear to give cause for concern. The first is organisation of work in class, where pair and group work were found to be rare. The focus of lessons would currently appear to more often emphasize grammar, vocabulary or receptive skills than productive skills. What is tested does not always seem to reflect what is taught, which suggests that assessment practices may not be fully informed. Motivating learners and engaging them in the lesson is also reported as a cause of dissatisfaction. Teachers were found to hold mixed views regarding the importance of independent learning, which suggests more emphasis needs to be placed on the understanding of learner autonomy. This paper discusses each of these areas in turn, with illustrations from the data, and makes suggestions for how teacher education could be enhanced.

Keywords: BUNJO recommendations for teacher education

Słowa kluczowe: BUNJO wnioski dla kształcenia nauczycieli

1. Introduction

Research into levels of achievement in English as the lead foreign language, conducted in lower secondary schools in Poland as part of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) in 2011, found that outcomes in the three skills tested (writing, reading and listening) were below curriculum target levels of A2 (Common European Framework of Reference) in the majority of cases (IBE, 2013). A companion study on speaking, conducted by the Educational Research Institute on a sub-sample of the ESLC students, found that levels of achievement of approximately 40% of the learners fell below A2 (Ellis, 2014a). These findings indicate that there is a need to raise the effectiveness of teaching and learning in Polish schools. One possible way to achieve this is to highlight areas which need to be developed during pre-service teacher education and during continuing education programmes such as the MA or postgraduate diploma.

2. The study

This paper draws on information from a descriptive longitudinal study: “Teaching and Learning Foreign Language in lower secondary school” (Badania Uczenia się i Nauczania Języków Obcych, BUNJO), which traced students through three years of learning, with the aim of collecting information to answer the following questions:

- How are foreign languages taught in lower secondary school in Poland?
- What factors have an impact on learning outcomes?
- Is the teaching of English in lower secondary school in Poland effective?

Conducted by the Foreign Language section of the Educational Research Institute in Warsaw (ERI), (see Acknowledgements), the project investigated a representative sample of 120 *gimnazja* throughout Poland between 2012 and 2014. Within each sample school three groups, continuing English from primary school, were nominated, giving a total of approximately 4300 students. As these groups were not selected at random the data is not statistically representative at this level, although the fact that it is the largest sample of students of English of this age group studied in Poland so far, means that we may generalise with some confidence. Based on the principle of triangulation, the same area of interest was examined from different perspectives and involved various respondents: school heads (120), teachers of English (380) and individual learners. Data was collected by means of questionnaires, interviews, tests and observations of 228 lessons from a sub-sample of 40 ‘volunteer’ schools.

In the preparation of this paper the following data from the first part of the study (2012) were considered: questionnaires given to students (4343), questionnaires given to teachers (380), interviews with individual students (480), interviews with school directors (115), interviews with teachers (301), classroom observation sheets, live coding of lessons, coded lesson transcripts and analysis of the stated aims of the lessons observed.

The aim of this analysis was

- to identify and describe areas of concern arising from the data
- to suggest how teacher education could address these areas with the aim of raising the effectiveness of future teachers of English.

Areas of concern identified were: the organisation of work in class; the focus of lessons; the relationship between the contents of the teaching and what is tested; teacher attitudes to learner self-regulation; and learner motivation. These will be described in turn, with illustrations from the data. Next implications for teacher education will be drawn and recommendations suggested.

2.1. Organisation of work in class

In the questionnaire teachers (380) were asked for their opinions on statements about how they organise work in language lessons. Learners (4343) were asked the same questions. 63.16% of the teachers stated that their learners often work in pairs, but only 42.92% of the learners said so. 49.74% of the teachers say that their learners often work together in small groups, but only 28.11% of the learners. (It should be emphasized that the teachers who answered the questionnaire taught these learners.)

Observations in class one in a selected sample of the schools showed that in 79% of the 228 lessons the predominant interaction was “Teacher works with the whole class,” with only 11% of lessons classified as being “predominantly pair or small group work.” Lessons were also coded live, using an observation scheme, and this showed that on average during 81% of the lesson learners worked as a whole class under the control of the teacher, who questioned learners, explained the material and responded to what learners said. Learners were active, but this mainly took the form of answering teacher questions, with rare instances of their initiating. Transcripts of the lessons were coded for the length of responses made by learners and 55.85% of these were found to be of one to three words, with only 6.55% comprising more than a sentence.

This observation data must be interpreted with care, as it is not representative, but appears similar to findings from other studies. The Polish component of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) reported “individual student work and teacher speaking to the whole class” as the most

commonly reported forms of interaction based on student questionnaire data (IBE, 2013: 84). Piechurska-Kuciel (2011), investigating Willingness to Communicate (WTC) among upper secondary students in Opole (n = 278), found that learners measured low for WTC and that this applied to both those who perceived themselves as being competent in English as well as those who rated their skills as low. She suggests that the results may be affected by what she describes as the socio-cultural norm:

in the context of obligatory formal education, such as the Polish secondary grammar school, students are not given a free choice of initiating discourse in English. They need to follow social rules governing their classroom behavior, relying on their FL teacher's instructions and requirements, which certainly limits their free choice of initiating discourse. (op.cit.: 246)

It would appear that the BUNJO data confirm other findings that secondary classrooms in Poland are traditional and teacher dominated.

2.2. Focus of lessons

The study employed various techniques to discover what typical lessons of English are like and whether there are visible trends in what is given focus. Both teachers and learners were asked to give their opinions on the importance of different areas of language in teaching in *gimnazjum*. Some differences can be observed in the rankings that emerge. Teachers gave equal weight to vocabulary, listening and speaking and then placed reading, grammar and writing in that order. For learners, however, speaking was in the first place, followed by vocabulary and writing, with reading, listening and grammar next.

When the aims of the 228 lessons which were observed were analysed and categorised it was found that lessons with grammatical and lexical aims predominated, comprising 34.65% and 34.21% respectively. Care must be taken in generalising from this data, however, as it comes from a sample of 40 schools which volunteered and includes 118 groups taught by 109 teachers over a two month period.

The picture which emerges from interviews with learners (n= 480), where they were asked to describe a typical English lesson, is one with a focus on reading and writing tasks, rather than on speaking. Transcripts of learner responses were coded and frequency counts calculated, which show that 71.4% of responses concerning skills referred to reading and writing, as opposed to 28.5% to speaking (see Ellis, 2014b for more detailed discussion). Doing exercises based on the course book was very frequently described.

Teachers and learners were both asked in questionnaires what is regularly tested or assessed during the language learning process. The core curriculum gives equal importance to the learners' language resource and their competence in the four skills. Indeed, the main aim of stage three is seen as "effective communication in the foreign language in speaking and writing" (MEN, 2009:42). For this reason it is to be expected that all areas will be assessed, but with emphasis on the productive skills. Teachers responses are, however, a little different. In rank order teachers claim that they regularly test grammar and vocabulary (96.05%), written work (87.64%), listening and reading (78.42%), and give grades for speaking (50.75%). Learners confirm this ranking, but it is of note that only 15.69% of the learners (n=4343) said that they regularly receive grades for speaking. Clearly other factors may influence the teachers' decision process as to what is tested, such as the type of assessment material on offer in the course book, or practical limitations connected with assessing speaking. However, this aside, there appears to be a mismatch between what teachers are declaring important in learning and what is being tested regularly. It would also appear that all aspects of the core curriculum are perhaps not being given equal importance as far as assessment is concerned.

With regards to learner self-regulation there are some interesting anomalies in the data. In the questionnaires 97.37% of teachers declare that they give their learners advice on how to learn the foreign language, but only 60.67% of the learners agreed with the same statement, while 18.44% disagreed. 78.41% of teachers agreed that "it is necessary to work a lot independently at home to learn a foreign language," although this was echoed by only 50.04% of the learners. However, at the same time, a large number of teachers (44.47%) agreed with the statement that "only if you have a good teacher can you learn a foreign language", suggesting that almost every second teacher appears to have some reservations about the value of learners working independently. When asked to give their opinion on the statement "Pair work has limited benefits. Pupils can learn more from the teacher" only 50.79% of teachers did not agree, which would seem to confirm the interpretation that teachers value being in control. It would seem that there is a trend amongst about half of the teachers questioned that learners should be dependent on the teacher, rather than self-regulated.

2.3. Learner motivation

In the study concerns about learner motivation were raised by both school directors and teachers. In interviews school heads were asked what could be done to raise the effectiveness of the teaching of English in school. The second

most frequently mentioned suggestion, made by 38.3% of the respondents, was raising the motivation of the pupils. During interviews teachers expressed similar views and it was the most frequently mentioned suggestion, made by 19% of the sample. This extract from one of the teacher interviews sums up a commonly expressed view:

I think most important is to raise the learners' motivation. It's a difficult age. *Gimnazjum* is a terribly difficult age for these young people. They're sort of torn between childhood and adulthood. Motivation is sort of lost. If the parents don't help to motivate them, or if [the learners] don't have any intrinsic motivation, then participation, effective teaching- someone could be a super teacher, teach their heart out and do everything, but if the learner isn't motivated, there's nothing you can do (own translation).

A further part of the teacher sample interviewed referred to lack of motivation in learners as one of the reasons why teaching in school is not as effective as it could be. Out of 264 mentions of reasons which reduce effectiveness, 79 (30%) concerned lack of motivation and intrinsic motivation in particular. In addition, in response to the question "What are your aims in teaching English in *gimnazjum*? What is most important for you?" 19.3% of the teachers (n=301) gave motivating the learners to learn as their main aim. In questionnaires, in response to "My learners are not especially interested in learning English," 40.26% of teachers agreed with the statement and only 50% disagreed. Teachers also partially agreed with the statement "My learners think that English lessons are boring" as only 55.79% disagreed.

By contrast, learners emerge from the data as satisfied with the way English is taught in school. From the questionnaires we learn that 59.18% of the learners like learning English in the current school year and 74.92% like the group in which they are learning English. Among the 480 learners who were interviewed, randomly selected from the same sample who completed the questionnaires, 81% declared that they like learning foreign languages. A very large proportion of the learners, in response to the questionnaires, stated that their English teacher is friendly and helpful (77.63%), likes English, and is engaged during the lesson (82.22%). Attitudes towards the course books in use are also fairly positive (57.51%) and a similar percentage (57.7%) were of the opinion that lessons are not boring. Learners understand that "it is necessary to learn and revise if you want to learn a foreign language" (75.35% agree with this statement), although seem slightly less inclined to put this into practice, as 50.04% agree that "you have to work a lot independently at home to learn a foreign language". They are aware that learning a foreign language is important (82.53% agree) and useful (85.38%) and 75.76% believe

foreign languages are important subjects in school. 63.93% have “plans for the future which require a good knowledge of foreign languages”. All of this suggests that attitudes towards language learning are positive and that the learners understand the importance and usefulness of learning them.

In a second questionnaire, where learners (n=4316) were asked about the usefulness of English in different contexts, with a view to discerning their motivational orientations towards learning, a third (66.93%) declared that they learn for their personal satisfaction, while 45.21% said that English is useful in their private lives. 81.63% think English is useful when using computers and other devices, and 53% for reading books, magazines etc. While the perception of the usefulness of the English in their lives at present is less strong than how learners felt about more distal contexts, such as future study (94.1%), future work (88.87%), or getting a good job (93.33%), there are still enough indicators to show that intrinsic motivation, as shown for example in the number who think learning gives them personal satisfaction, is not lacking, despite what teachers and school directors appear to believe. The reasons for this discrepancy may be a case of adults stereotyping “problematic teenagers”, or of school staff being overly influenced by the behaviour problems of a minority, or, possibly, of less positive attitudes towards other school subjects. Alternatively, it may be that teachers do not really know how their pupils feel about learning English.

3. Implications for teacher education

In this section each of the areas included above will be discussed in turn.

3.1. Organisation of work in class

When considering organisation of work in English lessons it would appear that in the data in the study there is a lack of variety of interaction in class and that teachers may be avoiding pair and group work. We have seen that the main aims of this educational stage, according to the core curriculum, are to develop effective communication, but it is hard to envisage how the development of speaking is taking place when learners seem to have limited opportunities to make longer responses, or to practise speaking to a class mate in pairs. Also of concern is how individualisation is to take place if the class spends much of its time working in lockstep. The teacher is able to offer assistance to individual learners presumably only when they are doing exercises by themselves, which suggests that these are not speaking or listening tasks, but more likely grammar or vocabulary focused. Again this raises doubts

about how the development of speaking is being supported. Finally, the core curriculum also requires the development of key competences, one of which is the ability to cooperate with others in a group, and it is the obligation of every teacher to work on these skills in all subject areas. It would appear that this is being neglected in English lessons.

In pre-service teacher education it would seem crucial, therefore, that the core curriculum and its requirements are introduced and explained. How the curriculum can be applied in practice through the way lessons are planned and organised needs to be made explicit in methodology classes. If the curriculum focuses on communication, then the way the lessons are organised must allow communication to take place. The relationship between affordances for speaking and classroom interaction should be pointed out to students in initial and continuing teacher education programmes, with simple demonstration of the amount of time a learner gets to speak in a teacher fronted classroom as opposed to a lesson which includes pair work. Attention also needs to be drawn to expectations that each child have the best possible conditions for learning and how this can take place during class, which would seem to imply that part of the lesson includes pair and group work, so as to allow sufficient time for the teacher to monitor and offer individual support to learners of differing levels of ability. Preparation of lesson plans which include timing and show patterns of interaction should form part of the requirement for the completion of the methodology component, and variety and balance of interaction be set as one of the assessment criteria.

An interesting question is where the teacher dominant model is coming from. Assuming that the importance of pair and group work is demonstrated during methodology classes in further education, is it the case that new teachers, on commencing work in school, forget all they have learnt and return to a 'default model', which is how they themselves were taught in school? Or is it the case that the university demonstrates the teacher dominant model during its teaching programmes? It would seem important then that practical language and methodology classes in tertiary education, at the very least, take a "loop input" approach (Woodward, 1988) and offer students hands-on experience of a learner-centred classroom. A further possibility may result from the impact of the national external examination in foreign language at the end of *gimnazjum*. Feeling the pressure of institutional and parental expectations of good results on the test, teachers may be choosing to focus less on communication and more on training learners in the skills which feature in the examination. Here it is advisable to remind student teachers that they are required to cover the whole of core curriculum and should not teach to the test.

The question of what effective teaching looks like and how the classroom can be organised to maximise learning opportunities for all pupils is a key area which also needs to be discussed and reflected on by students. If it is the case that teachers are avoiding pair work and group work then discovering the reasons for this is a fruitful area for investigation and may form the topic for master’s dissertations. In methodology classes students may well need practical advice and demonstration of ways to divide learners into pairs and groups, how to give instructions effectively and how to set up, monitor and end such activities. The question of use of mother tongue among learners and how to push output in English through the way tasks are planned is another important area of consideration.

When considering the school-based sections of the teacher education programme it would seem that care is needed with selection of teachers for the component of observation in school, with an emphasis made on choosing teachers who use a variety of patterns of interaction, rather than those favouring a traditional teacher fronted style. Allowing students to find teachers to observe on their own, as is commonly the practice, could lead to an impression that a teacher led classroom is what is expected. In the same way, the choice of school for students to complete their practicum is also important, so that the mentor teacher who will supervise the process models frequent use of pair and group work and encourages it in the students under their charge.

3.2. Focus of lessons

When considering the focus of lessons, once again the role of the core curriculum needs to be emphasized. It is expected that continuous assessment is an integral part of planning a course, as everything that is taught needs to be systematically assessed. Consequently, when teaching about planning in the methodology programme, attention also needs to be given to the role of assessment in the teaching and learning cycle. If teachers are assessing speaking less frequently than other skills then this problem needs to be addressed in the education programme. Assessing speaking in class is time consuming if the teacher expects that it can only be done one to one. Alternative approaches, such as grading selected pairs when all the class are simultaneously engaged in a speaking task, or having a group make a presentation with each member contributing, can be modelled during practical English classes at university. Options using new technologies may also be of interest.

The need to maximise hands-on experience for the student teacher suggest that integration of the process of how language is taught at university and the content of the methodology programme would be worth considering.

Learner self-regulation can also be introduced in this way through use of tasks for self-assessment, activities using the European Language Portfolio, where students set themselves goals, or tasks where they record themselves, analyse mistakes and plan what they need to improve. A similar process can be followed with assessment of writing if students are asked to note their common mistakes and then use these as a check list when proofreading their subsequent work. Student teachers learn most effectively through personal experience and we cannot expect change to be brought about in school if methodology in tertiary education is only taught through a transmission model in lectures. The *European Profile for Language Teacher education* confirms this view:

Teaching trainees about assessment procedures and recording learners' progress can take place during trainees' language proficiency courses. By integrating improvement of trainees' language proficiency and awareness of methods of assessment, trainees develop a more cyclical view of teaching, learning and assessment. (Kelly & Grenfell, 2004: 23)

3.3. Learner motivation

Motivation plays a key part in language learning and teaching. In the third stage of education in school (*gimnazjum*), the subject of the study described here, youngsters are going through the difficult period of adolescence when they may not outwardly appear enthusiastic about school learning. However these outward appearances may be misleading, as we have seen from this data, which showed learners have positive attitudes about learning English and motivations for continuing study. Teachers of English, we learnt, appear to have a more pessimistic picture of their learners than the learners themselves. This could suggest that more could be done with learners to discuss their reasons for learning English, to find out how they learn independently, or how they use the language outside school. These are authentic topics for conversation which allow all learners to contribute. Teachers and learners need to talk together about the language learning process, about learners' strengths and weaknesses and about ways progress can be made.

Encouraging teachers to share the aims of the lesson with the learners and to write these in the form of 'can do' statements, rather than only stating the lesson topic, is one possible way to help learners and teachers together set goals and then check the extent to which they have been achieved. This would lead naturally to self-assessment activities for the learners, which could also give the teacher important information about how the learners perceive their own progress. This practice could also be modelled during tertiary language

teacher education, across the curriculum. Indeed it could be considered in keeping with the philosophy of the National Qualifications Framework (MNiSW, 2011) where learning outcomes are similarly expressed.

4. Recommendations

This paper has argued that there is a real need, evidenced by data collected in school from a large scale sample, for development of skills among teachers of English. One way to do this is through implementing changes in language teacher education at tertiary level.

The European Profile for Language Teacher Education (Kelly & Grenfell, 2004) recommends that in the process of the education of foreign language teachers “the practical experience of teaching in the classroom and the academic study of pedagogical theory are to be treated holistically as they interact with one another.” (p.5). This idea is not unfamiliar in Poland and many faculties would claim to be already practising this. The question remains, however, how deep this integration goes. We have suggested that there is a need for the modelling of varied forms of lesson implementation, and for the modelling of a variety of formative assessment practices including self-assessment. We suggest, with this in mind, that the language component of the programme, particularly in the first level degree course, be closely integrated with the methodology and pedagogy components in order for trainees to experience these processes first hand.

The school-based component of the teacher education programme is as important as the university based components and similarly needs to be fully integrated with the methodology and pedagogy courses. The university needs to select the practice schools and the mentor teachers. To this end there is a need for the training and orientation of mentor teachers who will supervise the practicum in school and to find ways to integrate them in the methodology and pedagogy programmes.

An excellent tool, the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*, (Newby et al., 2007), exists which could be put more widely into practice to develop trainees’ reflective skills. Used in conjunction with the *European Language Portfolio* (Polish version CODN, 2005), for self-assessment of language skills, future teachers would complete their training having had substantial experience of alternative assessment practice.

The challenge that remains is for universities to encourage staff of language teacher education departments to work together, to build integrated programmes and to develop fully interactive ways of implementing them.

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